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ABSTRACT

This article is an exploration of differences among adults studying beginning English as a Second Language (ESL). Data was obtained through interviews with 20 Washington, DC-area Spanish-speaking adults enrolled in beginning ESL classes who had a range of different literacy levels in their first language. The interviews included two phases, one focusing on sociological factors and the other on testing and teaching, and the students' differences were examined in terms of both sociology of language learning and classroom instruction. The discussion bridges theories in adult literacy and ESL literacy with examples drawn from classroom-based research. Literacy is seen not as an autonomous skill but part of a non-autonomous framework. Illiterates are identified as a distinct social group, and the ESL literacy classroom is shown to be a cross-cultural situation in which the teacher's literate view and usage of language contrasts with the illiterate student's oral ways of using language and of learning. It is concluded that general notions of the effectiveness of current ESL programs wrongly lead to notions of complacency about the success of ESL literacy. ESL classroom programs are mismatched to the needs of the lowest level illiterate immigrant. ESL literacy models are needed that reflect an understanding of the cross-cultural nature of an ESL literacy classroom and of the relationships between literate teachers and illiterate students. Results suggest that the illiteracy of adults from Spanish-speaking countries indicates a host of other sociocultural characteristics that affect their ESL attainment and integration into U.S. society. Contains 24 references. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (Author/LB)

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Ways in Which Spanish-speaking Illiterates Differ from Literates in ESL Classrooms

Ana Lado, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This article is an exploration of differences among adults studying beginning ESL, adults who have a range of different literacy levels in their first language (L1). Differences are examined in terms of both sociology of language learning and classroom instruction. The discussion bridges theories in adult literacy and ESL literacy providing examples from classroom based research.

Literacy is examined not as an autonomous skill but within a non-autonomous framework. This paper examines the situation in which illiterates are a distinct social group. ESL teachers have been trained to understand the classroom as a cross-cultural situation between the teacher and student who is from another county. In addition, the ESL literacy classroom is a cross-cultural situation in which the teacher's literate view and usage of language contrasts with the illiterate student's oral ways of using language and of learning. The results have application for ESL literacy instruction, and implications for examining the teaching ESL in multilingual communities.

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Ways in Which Spanish-speaking Illiterates Differ from Literates In ESL Classrooms

INTRODUCTION

ESL programs are designed to match the needs of their immigrant students who are literate in their first language (L1) beginning with the first day of class, however, for illiterates this is not the case. This article is a brief exploration of the differences in the beginning ESL experience among adults who range in their L1 literacy levels. The intent here is to explore some of the complex cultural roots that underlie failure in ESL literacy attainment.

Literacy is examined not as an autonomous skill but within a non-autonomous framework. The basic issue addressed here is how the ESL classroom setting is a cross-cultural experience. That experience is of a different type depending on whether the student's L1 literacy level is elementary as opposed to middle school or above. Some illiterates come from oral subcultures. There is reason to believe that the first question asked was whether skill level in L1 literacy was linked to sociocultural constraints that would indicate membership in an oral subculture.

Second it was asked whether this in fact made a significant difference in attainment of basic ESL skills -- the kind of skills that are used in the first week of class. For example, understanding the terms "word," and "sentence."

RESEARCH IN ADULT LITERACY AND ESL LITERACY

A number of scholars have approached literacy as encompassing a wider scope than just reading skills (Hill & Parry, 1992; Langer, 1987; Kazemek, 1984; Trueba, 1984; Brice Heath, 1983; Spolsky, 1982; Ferguson, 1979). Literacy is assumed to be embedded in community behaviors. In multilingual communities it is linked to different linguistic choices. Yet, this is not fully reflected in ESL methodology (Guth and Wrigley, 1992). Only recently has ESL methodology begun to incorporate a combination of relevant linguistic factors that take into account the larger social context of literacy.

The concept of illiteracy being defined both by cultural constraints and skill level is not new. First, two major census-type studies have addressed this, Hunter and Harman (1979), and the English Language Proficiency Survey (USDE 1982). These used cultural factors to identify individuals as being members of different literacy types, for example "disadvantaged" or "workforce" types.

Second, a number of researchers have approached the attainment or failure of L2 literacy as broader than the autonomous technical control of skills. A non-autonomous view of L2 literacy is one that considers the interplay of "knowledge of form" and "substance" (Dubin, Eskey, and Grabe, 1986), the content, purposes, people, learning environment, and the social context (Carrell, Devine, Eskey, 1988; Wong Fillmore, 1985; Spolsky, 1982).

In multilingual communities there is often a sharp distinction in the value placed on literacy by the different linguistic groups. Ferguson (1979), Spolsky (1982), and Trueba (1984) describe the complexity of different functions of literacy according to each of the languages involved. Spolsky notes that literacy in multilingual communities is associated with different social roles. He urges us to ask who is literate, and which of the languages is written.

The notion of different uses of literacy by different communities is an underlying issue in the Adult Basic Education (ABE) field which has studied monolingual communities. Three notions from ABE are relevant, (1) the cross-cultural nature of literacy classrooms, (2) the differences between schooling of adults and children, and (3) adult resistance to literacy.

First, in ABE cultural differences between literate teachers and illiterate students have received some consideration. Adult educators suggest that a literacy classroom is a cross-cultural situation -- oral versus literate. If students are from an oral subculture, this subculture can clash with the literate culture of a teacher and the school program. For example, one characteristic of students from oral subcultures is that their learning style is rooted in mentorships and language used for real world problem solving rather than discussing ideas (Fingeret, 1982). For people of oral subcultures learning is linked to the high value placed on personal networks in contrast with a literate orientation to learning from books (Fingeret,

1982). Considering this in the classroom ESL setting, the classroom could represent "a bad fit" between methods used and adult needs because their is an assumed value on discussion of abstract ideas and book learning. The teaching of ESL literacy skills has not been separated from the teaching of social behaviors that while taken for granted in the literate community are appropriate within a literate scheme and inappropriate for oral subcultures.

ESL theory has an intrinsic awareness of the cross-cultural situation of teacher and student. And at first sight it seems ESL has an understanding of the literate to illiterate cross-cultural situation. Witness that ESL methodology has accommodated to differences between the undereducated and the educated in the different textbooks used in university affiliated ESL and community sponsored ESL programs. However, since the prevalent model of literacy is autonomous, these accommodations have not gone far enough, they have presumed that literacy is separate from community membership and that students understand and feel comfortable with classroom learning.

But the types of students who emigrate to the U.S. and enroll in adult ESL classes vary widely. Adult illiterate immigrants enrolled in ESL classes may be individuals who have had extended contact with literates or individuals who have been isolated from interaction with literates. If the ESL program was developed in ignorance of these differences, its syllabus and curriculum will treat students as if all of them participate in

literacy networks. Logically those students who do not meet these prerequisites do not succeed.

In fact, most ESL programs have focused on the type of adult learner who is familiar with institutionalized schooling and hopes to fully integrate into the wider literate community. A number of these programs concentrate on skill content (Thomas, 1987; Guth & Wrigley, 1992). There are some innovative programs available for students who lack familiarity with the use of reading for communication in L1 and English, and with participation behaviors in L1 or English literate networks, but not enough consideration has been given to the cultural differences between illiterates and literates (Guth & Wrigley, 1992; Spolsky, 1982).

Second, although both immigrant and American born adult illiterates are similar in their focus on the adult aspects of adult literacy they are distinct. Illiterate adults from other countries often have a different educational history than illiterate adult English speakers in the U.S. Ward (1986) studied English speaking illiterates who were at an early elementary level of reading, and compared their behaviors to that of expected behaviors of children with similar literacy levels. Some of her subjects, though reading at an elementary level, had actually attended school for up to the 8 years. Ward points out that these adults have a mismatch between metalinguistic behavior and reading behaviors. As an example, they can give a definition of a sentence but are unable to pick out a sentence in a text, in

other words they are unable to demonstrate an understanding of the concept in use. In contrast, illiterate immigrants from oral subcultures often have had few years of schooling. Will these illiterates be adept at metalinguistic definitions or basic concepts in use?

Third, adults learning to read are not like children learning to read, in that illiterate adults are fully functioning members of communities, and therefore acquisition of literacy can radically change their status, roles, and dignity. This change may be welcomed or unwelcome. The ABE field recognizes that adults often resist attending literacy classes. Adult literacy classes can threaten their sense of dignity, personal goals, and roles (Kazemek 1984; Fingeret 1982). Effective "literacy programs are those that are responsive to perceived needs, whether for functional skills, social power, or self-improvement" (Scribner, 1988:81). ESL literacy classes for some Hispanic immigrants also are an experience that entails giving up values that may be useful for an adult within an oral community. L1 illiterates can lead full lives within an oral network and social group (Brice Heath 1983; Fingeret 1982; Kazemek 1984; Labov 1972). However, different from the ABE example, for other ESL students the ESL class is a welcomed step to participating in the wider culture.

At a theoretical level one can approach the teaching of L1 illiterates studying ESL based on the notion of linguistic relativism, i.e. people from oral cultures. They are not

inferior just different. This view that oral subcultures are merely a different culture implies that they are self-contained wholes, which do not interact with the majority culture (Stubbs, 1980). While, people of oral subcultures may in fact live in an enclave and so lack opportunities to interact with the macro American culture, it would be unjust not to address this inherently inequitable situation. When interviewed, immigrant illiterates express an awareness that their economic survival is wedded both to participation in their immediate community, and in the wider English-speaking community. That L1 illiterates enroll in ESL classes by definition demonstrates that people or oral subcultures make an attempt to interact with the macro culture. We need to recognize the external social pressures of a majority literate English culture on that of the illiterate (Stubbs 1980).

Drop out rates are high in local adult ESL programs. Often adult ESL programs take drop out as a given, and accommodate to it without fully understanding how they contribute to it. In the ESL literacy programs, high drop out rates can point to a mismatch between the world of the newly arrived individual and common school practices; practices based on a pattern of learning that is inconsistent with that of oral communities. Grouping students by ability may in fact create classrooms which are closed systems in which the illiterate students are prevented from interactions that will lead to learning to read for meaning (Eisenhart and Cutts-Dougherty, 1991). Success is closely associated with community membership and the development of a

connection between the literacy taught in school and the wider world (Brice Heath, 1983).

Another reason for drop out is that particular educational conditions in effect contribute to the maintenance of separate oral subcultures. Until recently the norm for ESL programs was to be in classes in educational buildings and institutions. For some groups, this is inconvenient, unfamiliar, and fruitless since they lack the learning strategies and skills for taking advantage of learning in these environments. They avoid them. Workplace literacy and other innovative programs have recently added to the number of options available to adult students. Nonetheless, there are not enough. Comparatively few immigrants have access to workplace and other innovative types of ESL programs.

Another cause is that their are many more students needed ESL than the program can accommodate, so that programs unwittingly ignore the needs of the lowest level of illiterates. A prevalent manner of defining illiteracy in ESL programs is actually to wait and see who has difficulty in "regular" ESL; those who have difficulty and persist are placed in "literacy" classes. This definition has the effect of being a "gate-keeping" mechanism, the lowest students in effect do not have their needs met upon entry into the program. Only those who persist eventually placed in the literacy class. One effect of this is that the data collection on adult ESL students does not include them. In order to obtain a more realistic picture of the

total group of adult immigrants, information is needed about those who are not enrolled in ESL, and those who show up for only the first weeks of class.

ESL literacy programs can provide successful options for immigrants of oral subcultures, by utilizing ABE and ESL theory and addressing the ways in which these overlap in the ESL literacy situation. By examining the teaching of ESL to oral subcultures, implications are made for ESL literacy teaching as well as second language learning classrooms in general. It is vital that ESL professionals understand that a successful classroom is not isolated from the wider social context. Learning can only take place when teachers and students work together.

THE STUDY

In the Washington Metropolitan area, students who enrolled in beginning ESL classes in fact come from at least three distinct communities, those who are literate, those who have some previous education and want to be able to "read and write in English," and those who have little previous schooling but want to learn "English." It is clear that literacy has a relative value within these different groups.

Direct study of the illiterate population offers important insight for understanding the cultural dimension of beginning ESL instruction. We know that in an ESL classroom illiterates will differ from literates, it is of interest to study the extent to

which this is so. An exploration of ESL literacy issues was undertaken in 1988 by interviewing and testing 124 immigrant students in beginning ESL. The study focused on skills and sociocultural factors, and examined the relationship between sociocultural factors and ESL attainment of recently immigrated Spanish-speaking adults.

Method

The interviews included two phases, one in which information regarding sociocultural factors was solicited by means of Spanish testing, a questionnaire, and conversations. The second phase, included testing and teaching simple ESL tasks.

All the data collection took place in ESL programs in the Washington area. During preliminary interviews, it was learned that illiterates do not stay in ESL programs long enough to be described in terms of how much they learn over time. Among the 20 subjects first examined, illiterates more than literates were not in school one to three weeks after enrolling. Therefore, it was decided the collection of information only from students stay in ESL would be biased in that it does not include those that drop out, and will include students who have been exposed to the different types of ESL at the different ESL sites. Therefore, all the information reported here reflects one time interviews with each student. When student interviews were incomplete, then the continuation was held within the week. The students were interviewed within the first weeks of their being in ESL class.

The methodology of the current study accommodated to the population in other ways. When a person cannot write, they cannot easily produce written information, so examining school records would mean only examining those who take tests and provide us with permanent records. Measures used here collected information regardless of whether a student could use a paper and pencil format. The interviewer recorded answers to an oral questionnaire, accommodated to beginning writing levels, and completed observations of ESL performance using a one-on-one format.

The specific Spanish-speaking community being studied is distinct from the Puerto Rican and Mexican American communities in that the subjects are all immigrants. They are described as "recently immigrated" because in contrast to people who have immigrated in a previous generation, all the students had arrived within the last decade. Because the Washington Metropolitan area saw a massive immigration from El Salvador in the 1980's due to political turmoil, the majority of the subjects were from EL Salvador, a country in which there is a high illiteracy rate.

All of the subjects were screened for the study to ensure that they were beginners in English. This was done using scores on an oral proficiency test -- the Bilingual Vocational Oral Proficiency Test (1987). The Bilingual Vocational Oral Proficiency subtests used included one in which students answer questions about themselves and some pictures, and another in which students imitated sentences.

Data

Two types of data were collected, sociocultural and beginning ESL performance because a non-autonomous view of adult literacy rules out a definition based on "skill" alone. In the first phase, sociocultural factors were identified which distinguished types of "illiterates." Since there are few empirical studies and descriptions of first language illiteracy in relation to success in ESL (Spolsky, 1982; Ferguson, 1979; Trueba, 1984; Kazemek, 1984; Langer, 1987; Stubbs, 1980) this study had to developed definitions of illiterate, and semiliterate for ESL purposes. For this purpose knowing the literacy level of students in Spanish was considered essential. Students were placed into three categories of Spanish literacy: illiterate, semiliterate and literate. These categories were determined by each subject's score in Spanish spelling subtest of the Basic Elementary Skills Test (Gamez-Huebner, Watson and Omark 1984). The test has a range of grades 1 through 9. The levels used in the current study were set according to standards used in the countries of origin of the students. The "illiterate" group refers to those having less than 4th grade skills in Spanish. "Literate" refers to those with skills above elementary school (7th grade) and "semiliterate" is the term used for those who fall between these groups. The terms indicate only reading/spelling skills and not numeracy or survival skills as is common practice in ABE (Chisman 1989). U.S. standards have come about with policy associated with the Adult Basic Education Act

and those used by the Spanish-speaking countries are vastly different. Under standard U.S. policies, an English speaking individual would be classified as "illiterate" who in this study are considered "literate." For example, a student in this study classified as "illiterate" and eligible for ABE services is some one who can read and write at 8th grade level, and had eight years of schooling.

Illiteracy once it was defined reliably by the Basic Elementary Skills Test was compared to sociocultural constraints associated with literacy. Because literacy is not an autonomous endeavor, each student was asked questions about the following four factors or sociocultural constraints:

- Years of schooling in L1,
- Time since arrival in the U.S.,
- Education of family members, (specifically, if any had studied a vocation or received any education beyond high school) and
- Country of origin.

This in essence was the first phase of the interviews. In the second phase, information was collected on the student's beginning ESL classroom performance. The ESL classroom tasks involved the following:

- the teaching of vocabulary including some minimal pairs,
- a dictation,
- simple metalinguistic activities including
    1. judging whether two word/sentence items were the same or different (presented orally, presented both orally and in written sentence strips),
    2. naming the ABCs,
    3. recalling the definitions of "word," "letter," and "sentence."

This methodology allowed for descriptive information that

indicate a disparity in the abilities of illiterates as compared to the semiliterates and literates.

RESULTS

The general questions of this research study were the following:

- Do beginning ESL students fall into different types based on sociocultural constraints?
- What are the significant differences between illiterate, semiliterate and literate immigrants in beginning ESL tasks?

The study sheds some light on both of these. It demonstrates that (1) "literate" ability is linked sociocultural constraints, and (2) shows that "literacy" has a key role in success with beginning ESL.

In the first phase of the analysis it was determined that sociocultural factors were highly correlated to L1 literacy levels. Therefore in this study there is no statistical distinction between those who have the lowest reading skills and those who come from oral subcultures, i.e. those who had little schooling, had fewer immediate relatives, had been here the longest, and who were educated were also those who the lowest Spanish skills and had the most difficulty in all the ESL tasks (each of the sociocultural constraints will be briefly addressed). In other words for ESL purposes illiterates as a rule perform differently in ESL than do semiliterates and literates. They lived in different L1 communities, and it seems

that they may live isolated from the English-speaking community in the U.S. The value of English and an education in oral communities is distinct from what it is in the mainstream.

In this study the answers to the sociocultural questionnaire items indicate that those reporting having had few years of schooling in their country as a group were not different from their family members in that respect. They were typical members of families in which lack of schooling is the norm. They are members of an oral subculture.

In some ways the information collected shows immigrant illiterates to be divided into the continuum of illiterate types as described by Hunter and Harman (1979). Some students with low level skills interact with and live among "literates." They typically work in preschool settings, hotels, and cleaning companies. These students would have the benefits of a "work force" literacy program if offered through their companies. In one case, a woman started a family before finishing school and was the only illiterate member of that family. Typical of this "work force" type, her first goal was to obtain a high school diploma.

In contrast there were "disadvantaged" illiterates. For example, a student who had anything but 3 years of schooling. In El Salvador, he had worked for a "hacienda," and had little, if any, contact with the literate, majority culture. Here, he worked for other Salvadorans, was paid in cash and had no job security. Typical of this type of student, he was enthusiastic

about receiving one-on-one help during the interview, but had to be helped to fill out his name on the correct line of the waiver form. He seemed to not have the notion of left to right in books, evidenced by starting his notebook first on the front page, next time on the back page. He had to be strongly encouraged to during the spelling test.

One criteria for eligibility in the study was that the subjects had been in the United States for less than 11 years. However, within those 10 years, the illiterate group was distinct. Illiterates as a group had been in the U.S. significantly more years than the other groups. While all the interviewees were people in beginning ESL, illiterate had arrived in the U.S. much earlier than other subjects. The standardized oral questionnaire did not allow for investigating whether these students were enrolling in ESL for the first time, this was a financial consideration, or they had begun and failed ESL several times. Whatever the explanation for the differences in length of stay, the fact remains that as a group they are in the U.S. and still at a beginning ESL level years after the other Spanish-speaking groups have acquired the English necessary to move beyond beginning ESL.

The illiterate immigrants have little to no schooling, in contrast to adult basic education students who may spend more years in school, and therefore immigrant and English speaking oral subcultures approach learning to read as adults differently. These two groups differ in their history of schooling and their

personal attitudes toward education. ESL and ABE students differ in their classroom functioning skills. Immigrants reported their years of schooling at a level that matched their spelling subtest scores. In ESL, students defined metalinguistic terms and demonstrate an understanding of the concept at the same levels. The immigrant illiterate did not have a mismatch between being able to define and use metalinguistic terms that ABE students have. In ESL, the immigrants from oral subcultures were significantly different from those with better than 4th grade skills on all activities that used the metalinguistic terms: "word" "letter" "sentence", and in their metalinguistic judgments of whether word and sentence items were: "the same," "different." These differences were evident in initial definitions, the concept use, and in recall of definition after teaching. As an anecdotal example the term "word" was recalled by three different illiterate students to mean "The word of God," "Church," and "I give you my word."

ESL teachers are used to using terms like "word," "sentence," "verb," and others and some of their students haven't the least idea what it is they are talking about. It is no wonder that some teachers talk of being overwhelmed with the notion that they are to teach in some X number of weeks of evening classes, skills covered in several years of elementary schooling. The different use of language between the typical teacher and the typical illiterate is a reflection of the cross-cultural gap in the ESL classroom. Teachers are aware that the

highest failure rate in ESL is for students with low literacy levels, however, as is customary in the U.S., blame is placed on the student. When examined critically, the blame is to be placed on situational factors which contribute to the failure. Teachers express frustration and resentment that the lowest level students, -- those needing the most -- seemed to them to "not value ESL class."

ESL teachers also expressed dismay that their students, to the detriment of learning, were only interested in work. As one put it, "they enroll in school only for enough time to find out about a job." However, this conflict between work and school is evidence of a mismatched educational setting in which the teacher's and student's culture clash. The student's behaviors would not be an impediment to learning if the ESL class was established in a way that was a closer fit to the student's culturally determined behaviors.

The behaviors imply a "fully functioning adult life." Adult ESL programs need to accommodate to adult's with adult responsibilities. The average ESL literacy teacher needs training in understanding the cross-cultural situation they are in. Many ESL programs are organized in ways that ignore the fact that some adults place a different value on obtaining a job immediately, book learning, metalinguistic talk, social networks, common sense, and the use of language for real life problem solving. They have values that are equally valid but different from the ones assumed by the ESL program.

Implications

Illiterate immigrant adults are people who challenge the study of adult literacy in that there are a number of considerations which have not been a part of studying English speaking communities. Some of these are: resistance to literacy, social distance, the distance between teachers and students, and testing in English.

First, in English communities "literacy" may be resisted because literacy can bring turmoil into the life of an adult illiterate and the adults resent the source of the change. However, in immigrant communities, immigration brings with it a great deal of turmoil and there seems to be less resistance to literacy because the upheaval brought on by immigration. When learning the ways of "America," literacy is not singled out as the factor causing change.

Second, the L1 illiterate immigrant is at a greater social distance from the macroculture than illiterate English speaking community. For individuals in English communities obtaining "literacy" may mean the English speaker will be able to integrate fully into a community. The motivation to learn to read is based on a realistic hope of full integration to the educated community. Immigrants, however, realistically know that full integration into the English speaking community comes through more than just literacy.

Third, immigrants are also different in that they can hide

their illiteracy in a common problem, the inability to speak English. Different types of illiterates may or may not be conscious of the fact that they cannot perform skills requiring literacy. Many when confronted with English literacy tasks simply acknowledge that they cannot do the task because, in their words "I don't speak English."

Since the problem for ESL professionals is that both illiterates and semiliterates lack English, a distinction is blurred which makes an important difference for ESL instruction. Spanish-speakers who are conscious of the fact that illiteracy is the culprit, may find it socially acceptable in their community to use the English reason. It is easier to go to ESL class than it would be for English speakers to go to literacy classes. An English speaker may not be able to use the excuse "I can't read because I don't have my glasses." with the same social approval as the ESL student uses "I can't because I don't speak English."

Fourth, in ABE one speaks of illiterate students and literate teachers, while in ESL literacy there is the added complexity that the illiterates are Spanish speakers and the literates are English speakers. Illiterate immigrants are often treated as if there was the same cultural distance between the oral and the semiliterate students. When in fact even when two immigrants with the same low level of L1 literacy skill levels, let's say 3rd grade, could be from different types of communities and therefore differ in their knowledge of reading and their approach to learning ESL. One illiterate may be a member of a

community in which there is participation with people who use written language for communication. The other illiterate may have a leadership role in an oral community. When these different types of adults arrive in the U.S. their opportunities for taking advantage of ESL classes are different. Some illiterates are more "literate" for ESL classroom purposes than others.

There is in addition the issue of different oral language usage. In this study illiterates performed even the simplest oral tasks, those with basic concepts such as letter, word and sentence, with more errors than other students. This is an indication that these immigrants from an oral tradition and are not sharing and negotiating in classroom dialogue even when the classroom teacher uses what for him/her are the simplest of "literate" types of oral language. In classrooms, students use a wealth of social and other strategies and different problem solving techniques that help them accomplish classroom tasks and perform successfully in front of others including their English-speaking teacher. But in the standardized situation used here in which students received individualized attention many of these techniques are ineffective. The students here were not able to avoid writing nor "literate speech" typical of ESL classrooms.

Finally, there are better ways to conduct ESL placement than those practiced in many programs which use informal measures of identify illiterate students that ignore important differences among the undereducated. Even in this study in which it was

known that a number of the immigrants were not fully legal, they reliably reported facts about their schooling, entry into the U.S., and participation in literate institutions. The results of the native language testing gave information which for grouping purposes was very similar to that of the oral interviews. This suggests that identification for appropriate program placement is not a difficult matter of obtaining documentation of schooling, or of developing long native language tests. Programs should not use testing as a barrier to obtaining diagnostic information about students from all literacy levels.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this study of illiterate immigrant students in beginning ESL demonstrates that general notions of the effectiveness of current ESL programs are misleading us into complacency about the success of ESL literacy. This is not to say that some ESL literacy programs are more successful than some ABE programs. ESL programs serve a population who have a different history of schooling, are in the midst of change, and have a different approach to literacy than ABE programs. But within ESL we are not serving everyone equally well. ESL classroom programs are not reaching because the programs are mismatched to the needs of the lowest level illiterate immigrant. ESL literacy models are needed which reflect an understanding of the cross-cultural nature of an ESL literacy classrooms, and of the relationships between literate teachers and illiterate

students. For successful educational interaction to take place, we have to meet these students at a level that is closer to them. ESL literacy instruction should take place in an environment in which there is exposure to written English, involvement in real literacy tasks, and an understanding by the teacher of the student's values.

This paper attempted to describe the immigrant population in ESL classrooms before self-selection by drop out. It was determined that "illiterates" from Spanish-speaking countries are not just low in Spanish reading or spelling skills, but that their illiteracy often indicates a host of other sociocultural characteristics. When students were divided into three groups based on literacy skills, the lowest group was distinct from the others in their membership in an oral subculture in their native country, and the ability to be successful with English tasks taught in a basic ESL classroom. The assumption is made that this has an effect on their subsequent ESL attainment, their ability to stay in an ESL program, and their integration into U.S. society.

There is a complexity in ESL literacy which is not seen in ABE situations. In order to understand the complexities of ESL literacy failure or attainment further studies are needed which examine the questions of **who**, is the student signing up for the adult ESL program, **how**, is the ESL program responding to their unique characteristics, **which** written language is used for **what** purposes in a community, and **what** is the social distance between

the teacher and the student. This information is needed in order to develop efficient and effective teaching methods for ESL literacy and serve a population which is not currently being adequately served. We as ESL professionals need to intervene on their behalf in order to avoid becoming contributors to the forming of subcultural enclaves. Immigrant adults cut off from the mainstream themselves are unable to help their children and families take advantage of employment and educational opportunities.

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